

# THE ROTTER <sup>1</sup>

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IN the taxi Ayling suddenly realized that there was no need for all this haste. After twenty-five years, and a loitering, circuitous journey home.— six weeks to the day since he had said good-by to India — this last-minute rush was, to say the least, illogical, particularly as there was no one in London waiting for him; no one who was even aware of his arrival. Indeed, it was likely that there was no one in London who was aware of his existence, except, perhaps, the clerk of the club, to whom he had telegraphed ahead for accommodations.

The rigidity of his posture, straining forward there on his seat, became suddenly painful and absurd. He tried to relax, but the effort was more than it was worth, and he sat forward again, looking out.

Yes, things were familiar enough — but familiar like old photographs one has forgotten the significance of. The emotion had gone out of them. It was the new things, the unfamiliar contours, that were most apparent, that seemed to thrust upon his consciousness the city's gigantic, self-centered indifference. Yet it was just that quality that he had loved most in London. She had let him alone. She had been — he recalled the high-flown phrase of his youth — the supremely indifferent friend! Perhaps, he thought to himself, when one is fifty, one cares less to be "let alone"; less for indifference as the supreme attribute of a friend.

He felt a queer sweep of homesickness for India, whence he had come; but to feel homesick for India was

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ridiculous, since he had just come out of India because he was homesick for England. He had been homesick for England, he had been telling himself, for all those twenty-five years.

Well! here he was. Home!

Strange he hadn't thought of the automobiles and the electricity, and the difference they would make.

The taxi backed suddenly, gears shifted, and drew up alongside the curb. Looking out, Ayling recognized the high, familiar street door of the club. Something about it had been changed, or replaced, he couldn't quite make out what. The driver opened the door, lifted out Ayling's bag, and deposited it expertly with a swing on the step. Then he waited respectfully while Ayling fished in his pockets for change. Having received it, he leaped with great agility to the seat, shifted gears, chugged, backed and turned, and was abruptly round the corner and out of sight.

At the desk, Ayling experienced a momentary surprise to find himself actually expected.

"Mr. Ayling? Yes, sir. Your room is ready, I believe." The clerk rang a bell, and began to give instructions about Mr. Ayling's luggage.

Ayling felt that he ought to ask for some one, inquire if some of the old members were in; but, standing there, he could not think of a single name except names of a few non-resident members like himself, men who were at that moment in India.

"Will you go up, sir?"

"Later," said Ayling. "Just send up my things."

He crossed the foyer and entered the lounge. Here, as before in the streets, it was the changes of which he was most aware—figured hangings in place of the old red velours, the upholstery renewed on the old chairs and divans. Strangers sat here and there in the familiar nooks, strangers who looked up at him with a mild curiosity, and returned to their papers or their cigars. He wandered on through the rooms, seeking—without quite saying so to himself—seeking a familiar face, and found none. Even the proportions of the rooms seemed changed; he

could hardly have said just how ; not much, but slightly, though, all in all, the club was the same. Names began to come back to him ; memories resurrected themselves, rose out of corners to greet him as he passed. They began to give him a queer sense of his own unreality, as if he himself were only another memory. . . . Abruptly he turned, made his way back to the desk, and asked to be shown to his room. There he spent an hour puttering aimlessly, adjusting his things, putting in the time.

Then he dressed and went down to a solitary dinner. There was a great activity in the club at that hour, comings and goings, in parties of four and five. He found a kind of dolorous amusement in seeing how much more at home all the youngsters about him seemed than he. And he had been at home there when they were in the nursery doing sums.

Here and there at the tables were older men, men of his own age, and he reflected that among them might easily be some of his boyhood friends. He would never know them now. He searched their faces for a familiar feature, watched them for a gesture he might recognize. But in the end he gave it up. "Old town," he said to himself, "old town, by Jove! you've forgotten me!"

That night he went alone to a theater, walked back through the crowds to the club, and went immediately to bed. He was grateful to find himself suddenly very tired.

The next morning he rose late and did not leave his room until noon, when he went down to a solitary lunch. After lunch he stopped at the clerk's window and inquired about one or two old members. The clerk looked up the names. After a good deal of inquiry and fussing about, he ascertained that one of the gentlemen was in China, one was dead, and a third about whom Ayling also inquired could not be traced at all. Ayling went out and walked for a while through the streets, but was driven back to the club by the chill drizzle which suddenly began to descend.

He sat down in a chair near a window that had been

his favorite. Settled there, he remembered the position of a near-by bell, just under the window-curtain. . . . Yes, there it was. He rang, and a waiter came — a rotund, pink-faced, John-Bullish waiter, with little white tufts on each cheek. Ayling ordered a whisky-and-soda, and when presently the waiter brought it Ayling asked how long he had been in the service of the club.

“Thirty-five years, sir.”

Ayling looked at the old man in astonishment. “Do you remember me?” he asked.

The old waiter, schooled to remember at first glance if he remembered at all, looked afresh at Ayling. “I see so many faces, sir — I couldn’t just at the moment say —”

“And I suppose,” said Ayling, “you’ve brought me whisky-and-soda here, to this very chair, no end of times. What’s your name?”

“Chedsey, sir.”

“Seems familiar —” He shook his head. “You don’t recall a Mr. Ayling — twenty-five or thirty years ago?”

“Ayling, sir? I recall there *was* a member of that name. . . . *You’re* not Mr. Ayling, sir?”

“We’re not very flattering, either of us, it seems. But then, privilege of the aged, I suppose.”

“Beg pardon, sir. I’m sorry — I ought to remember you.”

“We’re wearing masks, Chedsey, you and I.”

“You’re right, sir, I’m afraid.”

They regarded each other, those two, Chedsey, rotund and pink, looking down upon Ayling, long and lean, with fine wrinkles about his eyes, and hair considerably grayed, wondering, both of them, why names should be so much more enduring than they themselves had been.

It was not until Ayling had begun to ask Chedsey for news of old friends, and chanced almost at once to mention Lonsdale, that both he and the old waiter exclaimed in the same breath, “Major Lonsdale!” as if the Major’s name had been a key to open the doors of both their memories.

“And you’re young Mr. Dick Ayling! I remember



you perfectly now!" Chedsey beamed. How could he have failed to remember any one of those gay young friends of the major's?

"And where," asked Ayling, "is the major now?"

"Major Lonsdale, sir—has been gone seven years. Hadn't you heard?"

Lonsdale gone! Lonsdale dead! Lonsdale had begun life so brilliantly. Ayling did feel left over and old.

"What happened?" he asked, and Chedsey, glad to talk of the major, told how he had left the club to be Major Lonsdale's man just after he came back from the Boer War. How things hadn't seemed to go well with the major after that; he lost money—just how, Chedsey didn't say, but gave one to understand that it was a misfortune beyond the major's control. In the end he was forced to give up his house, and Chedsey came back to the club. A few years later the major was taken with pneumonia, quite suddenly, and died. Did Mr. Ayling know Major Lonsdale's wife?

"Yes," said Ayling. "What became of Mrs. Lonsdale?"

"Here in London, sir."

"Wasn't there," asked Ayling, "a child, a little girl?"

"Ah, Miss Peggy, sir!" It was plain that "Miss Peggy" was one of Chedsey's enthusiasms. A young lady now . . . and soon to be married to a fine young gentleman of one of the best Scotch families. . . . She'll have a title some day . . . Picture in the *Sketch* recently—perhaps he could find it for Mr. Ayling.

"Never mind," said Ayling, who was not thinking of Miss Peggy at all, but of her parents, young Major Harry Lonsdale, and his pretty wife.—He remembered her as a bride—Bessie, the major had called her—a graceful young creature with brown hair and brown-flecked eyes, already at that age a charming hostess in the fine old house Harry Lonsdale had inherited from his father.

"They are living in Cambridge Terrace," Chedsey was saying. "Would Mr. Ayling like the address?"

Ayling wrote down the address Chedsey gave him, and put it away in his pocket, with no more definite idea than

that some day, if opportunity offered, he might look her up, for his old friend's sake.

He began to inquire about other men — Carrington, Farnsby, Blake. Dead, all three of them — Farnsby only last spring. Was it some fate that pursued his particular friends? But those men had all, he reflected, been older than he. And yet, he recalled the words of his doctor :

"A man's as old as his arteries. You've been too long out here. Be sensible, Ayling. . . . Go home — take it easy — rest. You'll have a long time yet. . . ."

Just a week later, to the day, Ayling stepped into a telephone-booth, looked up Mrs. Lonsdale's number, and telephoned. He had not counted upon loneliness.

At forty-five Bessie Lonsdale had encountered one of those universal experiences which invariably give us, as individuals, so strong a sense of surprise. She had discovered suddenly, upon completion of the task to which she had so long given her energies, that she had become the task; that she no longer had any identity apart from it. And her consciousness of having arrived at exactly the place where hundreds before her must have arrived had only added to the strangeness of her experience.

A week ago she had seen her twenty-year-old daughter off to the north of Scotland for a month's visit to the family which she was soon to enter as a bride. It seemed to her that Peggy had never been so lovely as when she said good-by to her at the station that day, slim, fragrant, shining-eyed, and looking very patrician indeed in her smart sable jacket (cut from the luxurious sable cape that had been part of her mother's trousseau), with the violets pinned into the buttonhole. And Bessie Lonsdale had seen with pride and no twinge of jealousy the admiration in the eyes of that aristocratic, if somewhat stern-faced, old lady who was to be Peggy's mother-in-law, and who, with true Scotch propriety, had come all the way down to London to take her home with her.

"I don't like leaving you alone," Peggy had said, as they kissed each other good-by. "You're going to let yourself be dull."

And her mother had patted the soft cheek, and replied: "I'm going to enjoy every minute of it. I mean to have a good rest and get acquainted with myself."

When, a few moments later, she waved them good-by as the train moved slowly out of the station, Bessie Lonsdale had turned away with a long-drawn and involuntary sigh — a sigh of thanksgiving and relief.

Peggy at last was safe! Her happiness and her future assured. All those years of hoping and holding steady had come now to this happy end. Ever since her husband's early death Bessie Lonsdale had centered herself upon the future of her child. She had had only her few hundred a year saved from the wreck of her husband's affairs, but she had set her course, and, with an air of sailing in circles for pleasure's sake, stood clear of the rocks and shoals. She had never borrowed; she had never apologized; had never been considered a poor relation, or spoken of as pathetic or "brave." Her little flat was an achievement. It was astonishing how she had managed at once so much simplicity, so much downright comfort, and so charming an atmosphere. She had done so much with so little, yet hers were not anxious rooms, like the rooms of so many women of small means. They had space, repose, good cheer, even an air of luxury. It was the home of a gentlewoman who could make a little better than "the best of things." She had even entertained a little, now and then — more of late, now that Peggy's education was complete — but this at the cost of many economies in the right quarter, and many extravagances also rightly placed.

Call this "climbing" if you will, and a stress upon false values. Bessie Lonsdale gave herself to no such futile speculations as that. She was too busy at her task. She was neither so young nor so hypocritical as to pretend that these things were to be despised. She had done only what every other mother in the world wishes to do — to guide and protect her child and see her future provided for; only she had done it more efficiently than most; had brought, perhaps, a greater fitness or a greater consecration to the task. And the success of her achieve-

ment lay in the art with which she had concealed all trace of effort and strain. Peggy herself would have been first to laugh at the notion that her mother had had anything whatever to do with her falling in love with Andrew McCrae. She believed that it was by the sheer prodigality of the Fates that, besides being in love with her, romantically, as only a Scotchman can be, young Andrew McCrae was heir to one of the most substantial fortunes in all the north, and would succeed to a title one day. . . .

So Bessie Lonsdale had sighed her deep sigh of peace and gone back to her flat. And because she had really wanted to be alone she had sent her one faithful old servant away for a long-postponed visit to country relatives. Then she had sat down to rest, and to "get acquainted with herself." And in two days she had made her discovery. There was no "herself." She had been Peggy's mother so long that Bessie Lonsdale as a separate entity had entirely ceased to exist.

It was at the end of the week that Ayling telephoned. And, although she had been avoiding even chance meetings with acquaintances, she found herself asking Ayling, whom she had not seen for twenty-five years, and whom she had known but slightly then, to come that day at five to tea. She realized only after she had left the telephone that it was because his voice had come to her out of that far time before she had become the mother of Peggy, and because she had a vague sort of hope that he might help to bring back a bit of the old self she had lost.

She was, when she thought of it, a little puzzled by his looking her up. Had he and Harry been such friends?

Promptly at five he came. At the door they greeted each other with a sudden unexpected warmth. And while he was clasping her hand and saying how jolly it was, after all this time, to find her here, and she was saying now nice it was to see *him*, how nice of him to look her up, he was thinking to himself that he might have recognized her by the brown-flecked eyes, and she was thinking, "He's an old man, older than I — the age Harry would have been —"



"So you've come home," she said, "to stay?"

"Yes, we all do. It's what we look forward to out there."

"I know." With a little hospitable gesture and a step backward she brought him in.

They had not mentioned the major who was gone, nor had they mentioned the years that had passed since their last meeting, yet suddenly, without any premonition, those two turned their eyes away from each other, to avoid bursting senselessly into tears. An almost inconceivable disaster, yet one for the moment perilously imminent.

Yet neither of them was thinking of Major Lonsdale, nor of anything so grievous as death; they were thinking of those terrifying little wrinkles round their eyes, and of the little up-and-down lines that would never disappear, and something inside them both gave suddenly away, melted, flooding them inside with tears that must not be shed.

She held out her hand for his hat and stick. For an instant they both felt a deep constraint, and as he was getting out of his coat each wondered if the other had noticed it.

Ayling turned about and stumbled awkwardly over a small hassock on the floor, and they both laughed, which helped them recover themselves.

"How long has it really been?" she asked, as she faced him beside the fire.

"Twenty-five years." He smiled at her, shaking his head. "Twenty-five years!"

"You *must* feel the prodigal son!"

"Not until I came in your door just now, I didn't at all." And then, without in the least intending to say it, he added, "You were the only person in London I knew."

It was the first of many things he had not intended to tell. As it was the first of many afternoons when they sat before the fire in her pretty drawing-room — that gallant little blaze that did its best to combat the gloom and chill of London's late winter rains — and drank their tea and talked, the comfortable, scattering talk of old friends;

although it was not because of the past that they were friends, but because of the present and their mutual need. They did not speak of loneliness; it was a word, perhaps, of which they were both afraid.

When they talked of her husband, of the old house, the old days, she felt herself coming back, materializing gradually again, out of the past. Ayling said to himself that he could talk to Bessie Lonsdale of things he had never been able to speak of to any one else, because they had had so much common experience. For from the beginning Ayling had had the illusion that Bessie Lonsdale, as well as he, had been away all those years, and had just come back to London again. He had said this to her as he was leaving on that first afternoon, and she had smiled and said, "So I have, just that—I've been away and come back, and I hardly know where to begin." Later he understood. For once or twice he met there a few of her friends, people who dropped in to inquire what she had heard from Peggy; people who talked of how they were missing Peggy, of the time when she would be coming home, of her approaching wedding, and one and all they commented upon the emptiness of the flat without Peggy there, and how lonely it must be for dear Mrs. Lonsdale with Peggy away.

"I seem to be the only person in London not missing Peggy," he said to her one day. Her brown-flecked eyes looked at him straight for an instant, and then slowly they smiled, for she knew that he understood. She had not needed to tell him, for he had divined it for himself. Just as he had not needed to tell her how much her being in London had meant to him.

As it was, the incessant chill and dampness of the weather had done his health no good. His blood was thin from long years of Indian sun, and he found it a constant effort to resist. The gloom seemed even worse than the cold, and, although he had thought that he should never wish for sun again, after India, he did wish for it now, wished for it until it became a sheer physical need. For the first time in his life he began to feel that he was getting old. Or was it, he asked himself, only that he

had time now to think of such things? Bessie Lonsdale saw it, for her eyes were quick and keen, and she had long been in the habit of mothering. "It's this beastly London," she said. "I know!" And it was she who made him promise to go away for a week in the country, where he might have a glimpse at least of the sun. He remembered an inn at Homebury St. Mary, where he had spent a summer as a child, and it was there, for no reason except the memory of so much sun, that he planned to go, "by the middle of next week," he said, "when Peggy will be coming home."

They had been talking of her return, and he had confessed to the notion that he would feel himself superfluous, out of place, somehow, when Peggy came home. His confession had pleased her, she hardly knew why. As for herself, she had had something of the same thought, that when Peggy came there would be — well, a different atmosphere.

She was looking forward daily now to a letter saying by what train Peggy would return. On Thursday there arrived, instead, a letter from Lady McCrae, begging that they be allowed "to keep our dear Peggy for another ten days." The heavy weather had kept the young people indoors, and a great many excursions which they had planned had had to be put off on account of it. She said, in her dignified way, many things vastly pleasing to a mother's heart, and Mrs. Lonsdale could do nothing but write, giving her consent.

When she had written the letter and sent it off she began to be curiously depressed, and she wandered through the flat, conscious at last of just how much she had really missed Peggy's laughter, her gaiety, and her swift young step. The week before her loomed longer than all the time she had been away.

That afternoon she told Ayling her news, but it was not until she had finished telling him that she remembered that he, too, would be going away. She hadn't known until then how much his being there had meant.

"I don't know," she said, "how I shall put in the week! After all, I've been missing her more than I knew."

It occurred to Ayling that, standing there before him with Lady McCrae's letter, which she had been showing him, in her hand, she was exactly like a little girl who was going to be left all alone.

The idea came to him suddenly. "Look here, Bessie; come down to Homebury St. Mary with me! It would do you no end of good."

The quality of their friendship was clear in the simplicity with which he made the suggestion, and the absence of self-consciousness with which she heard it made.

"I should love it!" she said.

"Then come along. You've nothing to keep you here; the country's just what you need."

She did not answer at once, but stood looking away from him, a little frown between her eyes. She was thinking how absurd it would be to object, and how equally absurd it seemed to say yes. It *was* so nice to have some one think of her as he thought of himself, simply, normally, humanly, as Dick Ayling seemed to have thought of her from the first.

Then abruptly she accepted his simplification. "I'll go," she said.

"Good! I'll telephone through for a room for you. . . . When can you be ready?" he asked.

"To-day — this afternoon. Let's get away before I discover all the reasons to prevent! I won't bother about a lot of luggage — my big bag will do."

"Great! I'll ask about trains."

Ali at once, like two children, they became immensely exhilarated at the prospect before them — a week's holiday!

He went to the telephone and presently reported: "There's a train at two-forty. Can you make it by then?"

She looked at the clock on the mantel. "We'll make it," she said.

He was getting into his coat. "I'll go on to the club, get my things together, and come back for you at two-fifteen, then."

He rushed away, both of them almost forgetting to



say good-by, and she went into her bedroom to pack. When, promptly at two-fifteen, he rang her bell, she was waiting, hat and gloves on, and called out, "All ready!" as the taxi-driver followed Ayling up for her bag. . . .

The spring had come up to meet them at Homebury St. Mary. So Bessie Lonsdale said to herself when she woke in her old-fashioned chintz-curtained room. The sun shone in at the windows, the air was balmy and sweet, and lifting herself on her elbow, she saw in a little round swale in the garden outside a faint showing of green nestled into the damp brown earth.

She got up, rang for a maid, who came, smiling, white-capped, rosy-cheeked. She had coffee and rolls with rich country cream while she dressed. Her room opened directly into the garden, and she put on stout boots and a walking-suit and a soft little hat of green felt, and went out. Ayling, who had evidently risen early, was coming toward her, swinging a great, freshly whittled staff cut from the woods beyond the inn. He called to her:

"You see! The sun *does* shine at Homebury St. Mary!" And then, as if in gratitude for so glorious a day, he wished to be fair to the rest of the world, he added, as he came up, "I wonder if it's shining in London, too."

"London?" she said. "London? There's no such place!"

"Glad you came?" he asked.

"Glad!" Her tone was enough.

"That's a jolly green hat," he said, and made her a little bow.

"Glad you like it," she laughed. "And that's a jolly staff."

He showed it off proudly. "Work of art," he said. "I made one just like it when I was here the summer I was twelve—I remembered it this morning when I woke up, and I came out to get this one."

She admired it critically, particularly the initials of the dark bark left on, but suggested an improvement about the knob.

"By Jove! you're right," he admitted, and set to work with his knife.

They were like two youngsters out of school. All morning they idled out-of-doors, exploring the little lanes that led off into the buff-colored hills, returning at noon, ravenous, to lunch in the dining-room of the inn, parting afterward in the corridor, and going to their own rooms to rest and read. At four Ayling tapped at her door to say that there was in the sitting-room "an absolutely enormous tea."

That night, before a beautiful fire in the sitting-room, they caught each other yawning at half past nine, and at ten they said good-night.

It had been so perfect that the next day found them following the same routine. And the next day, and the next. Bessie Lonsdale had not felt for years so much peace and so much strength. In their morning walks together her strength showed greater than his. The bracing air exhilarated her, and she felt she could have walked forever in the lovely rolling hills. Once she had walked on and on, faster and faster, not noticing how she had quickened her pace, her head up, facing the light wind blowing in from the sea. And, turning to ask a question of Ayling at her side, his white face stopped her instantly.

"Oh, I *am* sorry! Forgive me," she said.

He smiled, embarrassed, and waited a moment for breath before he said, "It's just the wind; it's pretty stiff."

And she had said no more, because it embarrassed him, but she suited her pace to his after that, never forgiving herself for her thoughtlessness. And she chose, instead of the hill roads, the level, winding lanes.

For five perfect spring days they spent their mornings out-of-doors in the sun, lunched, parted until tea, met at dinner again, and said good night at a preposterously early hour. And they could not have said whether they amused or interested or merely comforted each other. Perhaps they did all three. At any rate, it was an idyll of

its kind, and of more genuine beauty than many less plautonic idylls have been.

On the morning of the sixth day Bessie Lonsdale went out into the garden as usual, to find the sky overcast with light, fleecy clouds. But the air was soft, and she wandered about for half an hour before it occurred to her that perhaps Ayling was waiting for her inside. She went in to look, but saw him nowhere, and decided that he was sleeping late. She waited until eleven, and then went out to walk by herself. But she did not relish the walk, because she was uneasy about Ayling. She was afraid he was ill. She forced herself to go on a little way, but when she came to the second turn in the road, she faced abruptly about and came back to the inn. Still Ayling was nowhere about. He was not in the garden; he was not in the coffee-room. She went to her own room and sat down with a book, but she could not read. So she went into the corridor, searching for some one of whom she might inquire. But no one was visible.

Ayling's room opened off of the little public sitting-room at the end of the corridor. She went on until she reached the sitting-room, which she entered, and then stood still, listening for some sound from beyond Ayling's door. The silence seemed to grow round her; it filled the room, it spread through the house. And then, propelled by that silence toward the door, she put out her hand and knocked softly. There was no response. She repeated the knock — twice — and only that pervading silence answered her. She took hold of the knob and turned it without a sound; the door gave inward and she stepped inside the room. The bed faced her, and Ayling was lying there, on his side. Even before she saw his face, her own heart told her that he was dead. . . . He lay there quite peacefully, as if he had died in his sleep.

For an instant Bessie Lonsdale thought she was going to faint. And then, moved by the force of an emotion which seemed to take possession of her from the outside, an emotion which she could not recognize, but which was irresistible and which, as the silence had propelled her a moment ago, took her backward now, step by step, noise-

lessly, out of that room; caused her to close the door after her, and, still moving backward without a sound, to come to a stop in the middle of the little sitting-room. For now that strange fear, premonition — she knew not what — which seemed to have been traveling toward her from a great distance, seemed suddenly to concentrate itself into a single name, "Peggy!" . . . Confused, swirling, the connotations that accompanied the name took possession of her mind, of her body, her will. *Peggy was threatened.* . . . Through this thing that had happened Peggy's happiness might be destroyed! In a flash she saw the story — the cold facts printed in a newspaper — as they would undoubtedly be — or told by gossips, glad of a scandal to repeat: She, Peggy's mother — and Richard Ayling together at a country inn — the sudden and sensational discovery of Ayling's death. . . . She could see the stern face of Lady McCrae — the accusing blue eyes of Andrew McCrae . . . and Peggy's stricken face.

She tried to pull herself together — to think; her thoughts were not reasoning thoughts, but unrelated, floating, detached. . . .

Suddenly, by some strange alchemy of her mind, three things stood out clear. They stood out like the three facts of a simple syllogism.

There was nothing she could do for Richard Ayling now. . . . No one knew she was here. . . . A train for London passed Homebury St. Mary a little after noon.

All the years of Bessie Lonsdale's motherhood commanded her to act. Her muscles alone seemed to hear and obey. She was like a person hypnotized, who had been ordered with great detail and precision what to do.

Soundlessly, she went from the room and down the length of the corridor. In her own room she threw scattered garments into a bag, swept in the things from the dresser, glanced into the mirror, and was astonished to see that she had on her coat and hat. Then out through the door that led to the garden, a sharp turn to the right, and she was off, walking swiftly, with no sensation of touching the earth. A train whistled in the distance,



came into sight. She raced with it, reached the station just as it drew alongside and came to a stop. The guard took her bag, and she swung onto the step. It did not seem strange to her that she had reached the station at precisely the same time as the train. It seemed only natural . . . in accordance with the plan. . . .

At seventeen minutes past three o'clock Bessie Lonsdale hurried into a telephone-booth in Victoria Station, called up a friend, and asked her to tea. Then she took a taxi to within a block of the flat, where she dismissed the taxi, went into a pastry-shop, bought some cakes, and five minutes later she was taking off her hat and coat in her own bedroom.

She worked quickly, automatically, without any sense of exertion, still as if she but obeyed a hypnotist's command. At four o'clock a leaping fire in the drawing-room grate flickered cheerily against silver tea-things, against the sheen of newly dusted mahogany; books lay here and there, carelessly, a late illustrated review open as if some one had just put it down, and dressed in a soft gown of blue crêpe, Bessie Lonsdale received her guest. She was not an intimate friend, but a casual one whom she did not often see. A Mrs. Downey, who loved to talk of herself and of her own affairs. Bessie Lonsdale did not know why she had chosen her. Her brain had seemed to work without direction, independent of her will. She could never have directed it so well.

Even now, as she brought her in and heard herself saying easy, friendly, commonplace things, she had no sense of willing herself to say them consciously. They said themselves. She heard nothing that Mrs. Downey said, yet she answered her. Later, while she was pouring Mrs. Downey's tea, she remembered a time, over a year ago, when she had heard Mrs. Downey say, "Two, and no cream." She put in the two lumps, and was startled to hear her guest exclaim, "My dear, what a memory!" . . . She did not know whether Mrs. Downey told her one or many things that afternoon. Only certain words, parts of sentences, gestures, imprinted themselves upon her mind, never to be erased. She

seemed divided into two separate selves, neither of them complete — one, the intenser of the two, was at Homebury St. Mary, looking down upon Ayling's still, dead face; and that self was filled with pity, with remorse, with a tenderness that hurt. The other self was here, in a gown of blue crêpe, drinking tea, and possessed of a voice which she could hear vaguely making the conversation one makes when nothing has happened, when one has been lonely and a little bored. . . .

All at once something was going on in the room, a clangor that seemed to waken Bessie Lonsdale out of the unreality of a dream. It summoned her will to come back to its control.

Mrs. Downey was smiling and saying in an ordinary tone, "Your telephone."

Bessie Lonsdale rose and crossed the room, took the receiver from its stand, said, "Yes," and waited.

A man's voice came over the wire. "I wish to speak to Mrs. Lonsdale, please."

"I am Mrs. Lonsdale," she said in a smooth, low voice. Her voice was perfectly smooth because her will had deserted her again. Only her brain worked, clearly, independently.

"Ah, Mrs. Lonsdale; this is Mr. Burke speaking, Mr. Franklin Burke, of the Cosmos Club. I am making an effort to get into touch with friends of Mr. Richard Ayling, and I am told by a man named Chedsey, who I believe was at one time in your employ, that Mr. Ayling is an old friend of your family."

"Yes," she said, "we are old friends."

"You knew, then, I presume, that Mr. Ayling had gone away — to the country some days ago."

"Yes," she said, again, "I knew that he had not been well and that he had gone out of town for a week. . . . Is there — anything?" Her heart was beating very loudly in her ears.

"I dislike to be the bearer of bad news, Mrs. Lonsdale, but I must tell you that we have received a telephone message here at the club that — I hope it will not shock you too much — that Mr. Ayling died sometime to-day,

at an inn where he was staying, at Homebury St. Mary, I believe."

His voice was very gentle and concerned. She hesitated perceptibly, and his voice came over the wire, "I'm sorry — very sorry, to tell you in this way —"

She heard herself speaking: "Naturally, I — it's something of a shock. . . ."

"Indeed I understand."

Again she caught the sound of her own voice, as if it belonged to some one else, "I suppose it was his heart."

"He was known to have a bad heart?"

"Yes; it has been weak for years."

"I wonder, Mrs. Lonsdale, if I may ask a favor of you. You know, of course, that Mr. Ayling had very few close friends in London; you are, in fact, the only one we have been able, on this short notice, to find. For that reason I am going to ask that you let me come to see you this afternoon; you will understand that there are certain formalities, facts which it will be necessary for us to have, which only an old friend of Mr. Ayling could give — that we could get in no other way. . . ."

"I understand, perfectly."

"Then I may come?"

"Certainly." . . . There was nothing else she could say.

She did not know she got rid of her guest, what explanation she made, nor how she happened to be saying good-by to her at the very moment when the dignified, elderly Mr. Burke arrived, so that they had to be introduced. Though she must have made some adequate explanation, since Mrs. Downey's last words were, in the presence of Mr. Burke, "It's always so hard, I think, to lose one's really *old* friends."

Mr. Burke came in. He was very correct, very kind. He begged Mrs. Lonsdale to believe that it was with the greatest regret that he called upon so sad an errand; that he came only because it was necessary and she was the only person to whom they could turn. He added that he had known her husband, Major Lonsdale, in his life-

time, and hoped that she would consider him, therefore, not so entirely a stranger to her.

She heard him as one hears music far away, only the accents and the climaxes coming clear. He asked her questions, and she was conscious of answering them: How long had she known Mr. Ayling? — He and her husband had been boyhood friends; she had met him first at the time of her marriage to Major Lonsdale. Had they kept up the friendship during all these years? — No, she had heard nothing of Mr. Ayling since her husband's death; she knew that he was in India; they had renewed the friendship when he returned to England a short time ago. — Ah, it was probable, then, that she knew very little about any attachments Mr. Ayling might have had? — Here Mr. Burke shifted his position, coughed slightly, and said:

"I ask you these questions, Mrs. Lonsdale, because of a very — may I say — a very unfortunate element in connection with the case. It appears that there was a woman with Mr. Ayling at the Homebury St. Mary inn."

Bessie Lonsdale waited, she did not know for what. Whole minutes seemed to go by with the elderly Mr. Burke sitting there in his attitude of formal sympathy before his voice began again.

"I have only been free to mention this to you, Mrs. Lonsdale, because of the fact that you will hear of it in any case, since it must come out in the formalities —"

"Formalities?" Her voice cut sharply into his.

"There will, of course, be an inquest — an investigation — the usual thing. I have been in communication with the coroner's office by telephone, and I have promised to drive down to Homebury St. Mary myself this afternoon. He was away on another case, and will not reach there himself until six. Meantime we must do what we can. They will necessarily make an effort to discover the woman."

Bessie Lonsdale must have given some sort of involuntary cry, the implication of which Mr. Burke interpreted in his own way, for he changed his tone to say:



"I'm afraid, my dear Mrs. Lonsdale, that she was a bit of a rotter, whoever she was, for she — ran."

"Ran?" She repeated the word.

He nodded. "Disappeared."

She did not know what expression it was of hers that caused him to say: "I don't wonder you look so shocked. I was shocked. Women don't often do that sort of thing. . . ." She wanted to cry out that that sort of thing didn't often happen to women, but he was going on. He had risen and was walking slowly up and down before the smoldering fire, and in his incisive, deliberate, well-bred voice he was excoriating the woman who had been so cowardly as to desert a dying man. "Even if she hadn't seriously cared, or if, for that matter, she hadn't cared at all, it would seem that mere common decency . . . It puts, frankly, a very unpleasant light on the whole affair. . . . Ayling was a gentleman, and — you will forgive me for saying so, I'm sure — just the decent sort to be imposed upon, to allow himself to be led into the most unfortunate affair."

She wanted to stop him, to cry out, to protest. But his words were like physical blows which stunned her and made her too weak to speak. She felt that if he went on much longer she would lose consciousness altogether. Even now she heard only fragments of words.

Suddenly she heard the word "publicity." He had stopped before her and was looking down at her.

"I think, Mrs. Lonsdale, that the thing we both wish — that is, we at the club, and you, as his friend — is to do what we can to save any unnecessary scandal in connection with poor Ayling's death. It is the least we can do for him."

"Yes!" She grasped frantically at the straw. "Yes, by all means that!"

"You would be willing to help?"

"Yes, anything! But what is there I can do?"

He was maddeningly deliberate. "You are the only person, it appears — at least the only person available — who has been aware of the condition of Mr. Ayling's heart. You can say, can you not, with certainty, that

he did suffer from a serious affection of the heart?"

"He came home from India on account of it."

"Very well, then. It was also the verdict of the doctor who was called. I think together we may be able to obviate the necessity of a too public investigation — at any rate, we shall see. It must be done, of course, before the official investigation begins. Therefore, if you will come down with me this afternoon, in my car —"

"Come with you? Where?"

"To the inn, at Homebury," he said.

She was trapped . . . trapped. . . . The realization of it sprang upon her, but too late, for already she cried out, "Oh, I couldn't — I couldn't do that!"

Mr. Burke was looking down at her. He loomed above her like the figure of fate. . . . She was trapped. . . . There was no way out, and suddenly she realized that she had risen and said: "Forgive me! To be sure I will go."

"I understand," said Mr. Burke, "how one shrinks from that sort of thing."

She did not know what she was going to do. She only knew that for this step, at least, she could no longer resist. Again she had the sensation of speaking and moving automatically, of decisions making themselves without the effort of her will.

She asked how soon he wished to go, and he said, consulting his watch, that they ought to start at once; his car was waiting in the street, since he had planned to go on directly from her house. She excused herself, and went to her room. She did not change her dress, but put on a long, warm coat, her hat, her veil, her gloves, and made sure of her key in her purse. Then she came out and said she was ready to go. He complimented her, with a smile, on the short time it had taken her, and she wondered if he had really seen her hesitation of a few moments before. They went down the stairs together. At the curb a chauffeur stood beside a motor, into which, with the utmost consideration for her comfort, Mr. Burke handed her. Then he gave his instructions to the chauffeur, and followed her in.

And there began for Bessie Lonsdale that fantastic ride in which she felt herself being carried forward, as if on the effortless wings of fate itself, to the very scene from which she had fled.

She had no idea, no dramatization in her mind, of what awaited her or of what she intended to do. Her imagination refused to focus upon it; and, strangely, she seemed almost to be resting, leaning back against the tufted cushions, resting against the time when she should be called upon for her strength. For she only knew that when the time came to act she would act.

It was curious how she did not think of Peggy. She was like a lover who has been set a herculean task to accomplish before he may even think of his beloved.

Beside her, Mr. Burke seemed to understand that she did not wish to talk. Perhaps he was thinking of other things; after all, he had not been Richard Ayling's friend; it was only a human duty he performed.

Long stretches went by in which she saw nothing on either side, and other stretches in which everything—houses, trees, objects of all kinds—were exceedingly clear cut and magnified. . . .

"I'm afraid," said Mr. Burke's voice, "that we're running into a storm."

Bessie Lonsdale looked up, and saw that those fleecy, light-gray clouds which she had seen in the sky early that morning as she stood waiting for Ayling in the garden of the inn, and which had been gathering all day, hung now black and menacing just above her head.

It descended upon them suddenly; torrents ran in the road. The wind veered, and sent great gusts of rain into the car. The chauffeur turned and asked if he should stop and put the curtains up. Mr. Burke said no, to go on, they might run through it, and it was too violent to last. Meantime he worked with the curtains himself, and she helped. But it was no use; they were getting drenched, and the wind whipped the curtains out of their hands. Mr. Burke leaned forward and called to the chauffeur to ask if there was any place near where they might stop.

"There's an inn about half a mile farther on. Shall I make it?"

"By all means."

They ran presently into the strips of light that shed outward from the lighted windows of the inn. A half-dozen motors already were lined up outside. They got out and together ran for the door.

Inside, the small public room was almost filled. People sat at the tables, ordering things to eat and drink, and making the best of it. They chose a small corner table, a little apart from the rest. The landlord bustled up and took their coats to dry before the kitchen fire. A very gay, very dripping party of six came in, assembled with much laughter the last two tables remaining unoccupied, and settled next to them, so that they were no longer in a secluded spot.

In a few moments there came in, almost blown through the door by a violent gust of wind and rain, a short, stout, ruddy person, who, when the landlord had relieved him of his hat and coat, stood looking about for a vacant seat. The landlord came toward the table where sat Mrs. Lonsdale and Mr. Burke.

"Sorry, sir," he said; "it's the only place left."

"May I?" asked the stranger, and at Mrs. Lonsdale's nod and smile, and Mr. Burke's assent, he drew out the chair and sat down. The two men spoke naturally of the suddenness of the storm, of the good fortune of finding a refuge so near.

Bessie Lonsdale was glad of some one else, glad when she heard the stranger and Mr. Burke fall into the easy passing conversation of men. It would relieve her of the necessity to talk. It would give her time to think; for it seemed, dimly, that respite had been offered her. Into her thoughts broke the voice of Mr. Burke addressing her:

"How very singular, Mrs. Lonsdale! This gentleman is Mr. Ford, the coroner, also on his way to Homebury!"

The stranger was on his feet, bowing and acknowledging the introduction of Mr. Burke. Bessie Lonsdale had



the sensation of waters closing over her, yet she, too, was bowing and acknowledging the introduction of Mr. Burke. She had a vivid impression of light shining downward upon the red-gray hair of Mr. Ford, as he sat down again; and of Mr. Burke saying something about "the case," and about Mrs. Lonsdale being an old friend of the dead man; about her having been good enough to volunteer to shed whatever light she might have upon the case, and of their meeting being the "most fortunate coincidence."

Mr. Ford signified that he, too, looked upon it in that way. They would go on to Homebury together, he said, when the storm had cleared.

"I suppose," he asked, leaning forward a little, confidentially, "that Mrs. Lonsdale knows of the — peculiar element —"

"The woman — yes," said Mr. Burke. And Bessie Lonsdale inclined her head and said, "I know."

"And do you know who she was?"

She had only to make a negative sign, for Mr. Burke, with nice consideration, anticipated her reply:

"Unfortunately, Mr. Ford, no one appears to have the least idea who she might be. Mrs. Lonsdale, however, has been able to clear up a point which may, I fancy, make the identity of the woman less important than it might otherwise appear to be. Mrs. Lonsdale has known for some time of the serious condition of Mr. Ayling's heart. It was because of it, she tells me, that Mr. Ayling came home from India. Mrs. Lonsdale's testimony, together with the statement of the physician who was called, would seem to leave little doubt that it was merely a case of heart."

Mr. Ford was nodding his head. "So it would," he said. "Yes, so it would." He stopped nodding, and sat there an instant, as if he were thinking of something else. "If that's the case," he broke out, "what a rotter, by Jove! that woman was!"

"Rotter, I think," said Mr. Burke, "was precisely the word I used."

And Bessie Lonsdale listened for the second time that

day while two voices, now, instead of one, were lifted in excoriation of some woman who seemed to grow, as they talked, only a shade less real than herself.

She had again the sensation of the words beating upon her like blows which she was powerless to resist. She lost, as one does in physical pain, all sense of time. . . .

"However," Mr. Ford brought down his hand with a kind of judicial finality, "if Mrs. Lonsdale will come on down with us now — the storm seems to have slackened — we'll see what can be done." He turned in his chair as if he were preparing to rise.

At the movement Bessie Lonsdale seemed to grow rigid in her chair.

"Wait."

Mr. Burke and Mr. Ford turned, startled by the strangeness of her tone. They waited for her to speak.

"I can't go."

"Can't go?" They echoed it together. "Why not?"

"Because," said she, "I am the woman you have been talking about."

For an instant they sat perfectly motionless, the three of them. Then slowly Mr. Burke and Mr. Ford turned their heads and looked at each other, as if to verify what they had heard. Mr. Burke put out his hand toward Bessie Lonsdale's arm, resting on the table, and he spoke very gently indeed:

"My dear Mrs. Lonsdale, this is impossible."

"Impossible," she said, passing her hand across her eyes, "impossible?"

"Yes, Mrs. Lonsdale." He spoke reasonably, as if she were a child. "It couldn't be you." He turned now to include Mr. Ford, who sat staring at them both. "I myself gave Mrs. Lonsdale the news of Mr. Ayling's death, over the telephone. She was at her home, in Cambridge Terrace, quietly having tea with a friend; the friend was still there when I arrived. You have been at home, in London, all day."

"No," she said. "No, Mr. Burke."

"I think," said Mr. Ford, also very gently indeed, "that perhaps Mrs. Lonsdale is trying shield some one."

Until that instant Bessie Lonsdale had no plan. She had only known that she could not go with them to Homebury St. Mary, there to be recognized. But something in the suggestion of Mr. Ford—in the tone, perhaps, more than the words—caused her to say, looking from one to the other of these two men so lately strangers to her:

"I wonder—I wonder if I could make you understand!"

They begged her to believe that that was the thing they wished most to do.

"I did it"—she paused, and forced herself to go on—"because of my daughter."

Intent upon her truth, she did not even see by the shocked expression of their faces the awfulness of the thing they thought she confessed, and the obviousness of the reason to which their minds had leaped.

Mr. Burke put out his hand again and laid it upon her arm, which trembled slightly at his touch. "Mrs. Lonsdale," he said, and this time he spoke even more gently, but more urgently, than before, "are you *sure* you wish to tell?"

"No," said Bessie Lonsdale, "but I've *got* to, don't you see?"

Mr. Ford moved in his chair, and spoke, guarding his voice, judicially. "Since we have gone so far, it will be even better, perhaps, for Mrs. Lonsdale to tell it to us here."

Mr. Burke nodded, and they looked toward her expectantly.

"Yes, Mrs. Lonsdale?" said Mr. Ford.

An instant the brown-flecked eyes appeared to be searching for some human contact which she seemed vaguely to have lost. And then she began at the beginning—with her daughter's engagement to young Andrew McCrae, her happiness, her security—and quietly, with only now and then a slight tension of her body and her voice, she told it all to them, exactly as it happened, without plea or embellishment. She had only one stress, and that she tried to make reasonable to them—her child's security.

And they waited, attentive and patient, for the motive to emerge, for the beginning of that complication between her daughter and Richard Ayling, which they believed was to be the crux of her narrative.

And as her story progressed their bewilderment increased, for never, it appeared, had Bessie Lonsdale's daughter so much as heard of the existence of the man who lay dead at Homebury inn. She seemed even to make a special point of that.

They thought she but put it off against the time when it should be forced from her lips; but her story did not halt; she was telling it step by step, accounting for every hour of the time.

They waited for her to offer proof of the condition of Ayling's heart. She did not mention it, except to say, when she came to relating the moment of her discovery, that she had not thought of it; that even when she opened the door of his room she did not think directly of his heart; and only when she saw him actually lying there so peacefully dead did she remember the danger in which he constantly lived. She seemed to offer it as proof of the suddenness and completeness of her shock, and in extenuation of the thing she afterward did.

Slowly, gradually, as they listened, and as the light of her omissions made it clear, it had begun to dawn upon them that Bessie Lonsdale was telling the whole of the truth. And by it she sought to disprove *something*, but not the thing they thought.

She had paused, at the point of her flight, to attempt, a little hopelessly, to make her impulse real to them. She spoke of the inflexible honor of the McCraes, of the great respect which had for generations attached to their name. Then suddenly, as if she saw the utter hopelessness of making them understand, she seemed with a gesture to give up abstractions and obscurities and to find in the depth of her mother's heart the final simple words:

"Don't you see?" she said. "I hadn't thought how my being there at the same inn with Mr. Ayling would look — and then, all at once, it came over me. The whole thing, how it would look to the world, how it would look



to the family of my daughter's fiancé,—and that it might mean the breaking of the engagement,—the wreck of her future happiness—don't you see—I didn't think of 'being a rotter'—I only thought of her!"

They uttered, both of them, a sudden exclamation, as if they had been struck. By their expressions one might have thought the woman the accuser and the two men the accused.

"Oh, my dear Mrs. Lonsdale—!" they both began at once, but she stopped them with a gesture of her hand.

"I don't blame you," she said, "I don't blame you. I *was* a rotter, to run, but I simply didn't think of myself."

Her tone, her gentleness, were the final proof. Only the innocent so graciously forgive.

"And now," she was saying, a great weariness in her voice, "I've told you. Do you want me to go on? It isn't raining any more."

"Perhaps, Mr. Ford—" Mr. Burke began. A look passed between them, like a question and an assent.

"If you, Mr. Burke," said Mr. Ford, "will come on with me, I think we can let your man drive Mrs. Lonsdale home. It will not be necessary for her to appear."

Bessie Lonsdale's thankfulness could find itself no words; it was lost in that first moment in astonishment. She had not really expected them to believe. It had not even, as she told it, seemed to her own ears adequate.

"I think," said Mr. Burke, seeing her silent so long, "that Mrs. Lonsdale hasn't an idea of the seriousness of the charge she has escaped."

"Charge?" she repeated—"Charge?—" and without another word, Bessie Lonsdale fainted in her chair. And as she lost consciousness she heard, dim and far away, the voice of Mr. Ford reply: "That—the fact that she *hadn't* an idea of it—and that alone, is why she *has* escaped."

"I'm perfectly sure," said Peggy Lonsdale, on Saturday afternoon, "that you *did* let yourself have a dull time!" She was exploring the flat before she had taken off her things, and had stopped to sit for a moment on

the arm of her mother's chair. "Anyway, mother dear, you didn't have to think of me! That must have been a relief!"

She put down her head and kissed her, and Bessie Lonsdale patted the fragrant young cheek.

"Oh, I thought of you occasionally," she said.